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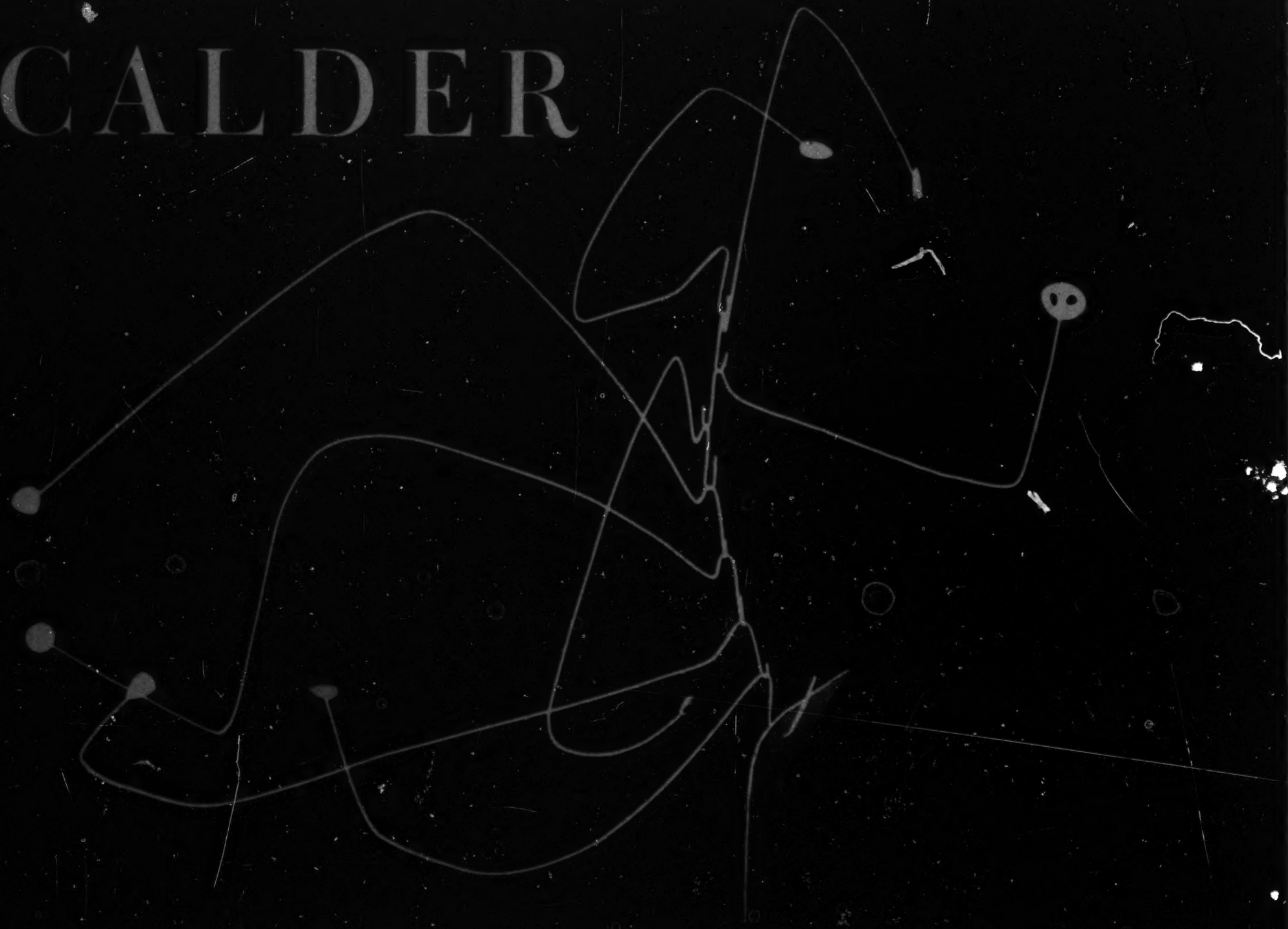

ALEXANDER CALDER

DECEMBER 9—DECEMBER 27

1947

BUCHHOLZ GALLERY

CURT VALENTIN

32 EAST 57TH STREET • NEW YORK

CALDER'S MOBILES

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

If sculpture is the art of carving movement in a motionless mass, it would be wrong to call Calder's art sculpture. He does not aim to suggest movement by imprisoning it in noble but inert substances like bronze or gold, where it would be doomed forever to immobility; he lures it into being, by the use of unstable and base materials, building strange constructions of bits of bone, tin or zinc, of stems and palm-leaves, of disks, feathers and petals. They are sometimes resonators, often booby-traps; they hang on the end of a thread like spiders, or perhaps squat stolidly on a pedestal, crumpled up and seemingly asleep. But let a passing draft of cool air strike them, they absorb it, give it form, spring to life: a "mobile" is born!

Grateful *Acknowledgment* is made to *Mr. Louis Carré* for giving the permission to reprint the text by *Jean-Paul Sartre*, first published in the catalogue of the Calder Exhibition at the *Galerie Louis Carré* in Paris in 1946 and reprinted in English in *Style en France* 1947, No. 5 and to *Herbert Matter* for contributing the photographs and *Mr. Saul Steinberg* the portrait.

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A "mobile", one might say, is a little private celebration, an object defined by its movement and having no other existence. It is a flower that fades when it ceases to move, a "pure play of movement" in the sense that we speak of a pure play of light. I possess a bird of paradise with iron wings. It needs only to be touched by a breath of warm air: the bird ruffles up with a jingling sound, rises, spreads its tail, shakes its crested head, executes a dance step, and then, as if obeying a command, makes a complete about-turn with wings outspread.

But most of Calder's constructions are not imitative of nature; I know no less deceptive art than his. Sculpture suggests movement, painting suggests depth or light. A "mobile" does not "suggest" anything: it captures genuine living movements and shapes them. "Mobiles" have no meaning, make you think of nothing but themselves. They *are*, that is all; they are absolutes. There is more of the unpredictable about them than in any other human creation. No human brain, not even their creator's, could possibly foresee all the complex combinations of which they are capable. A

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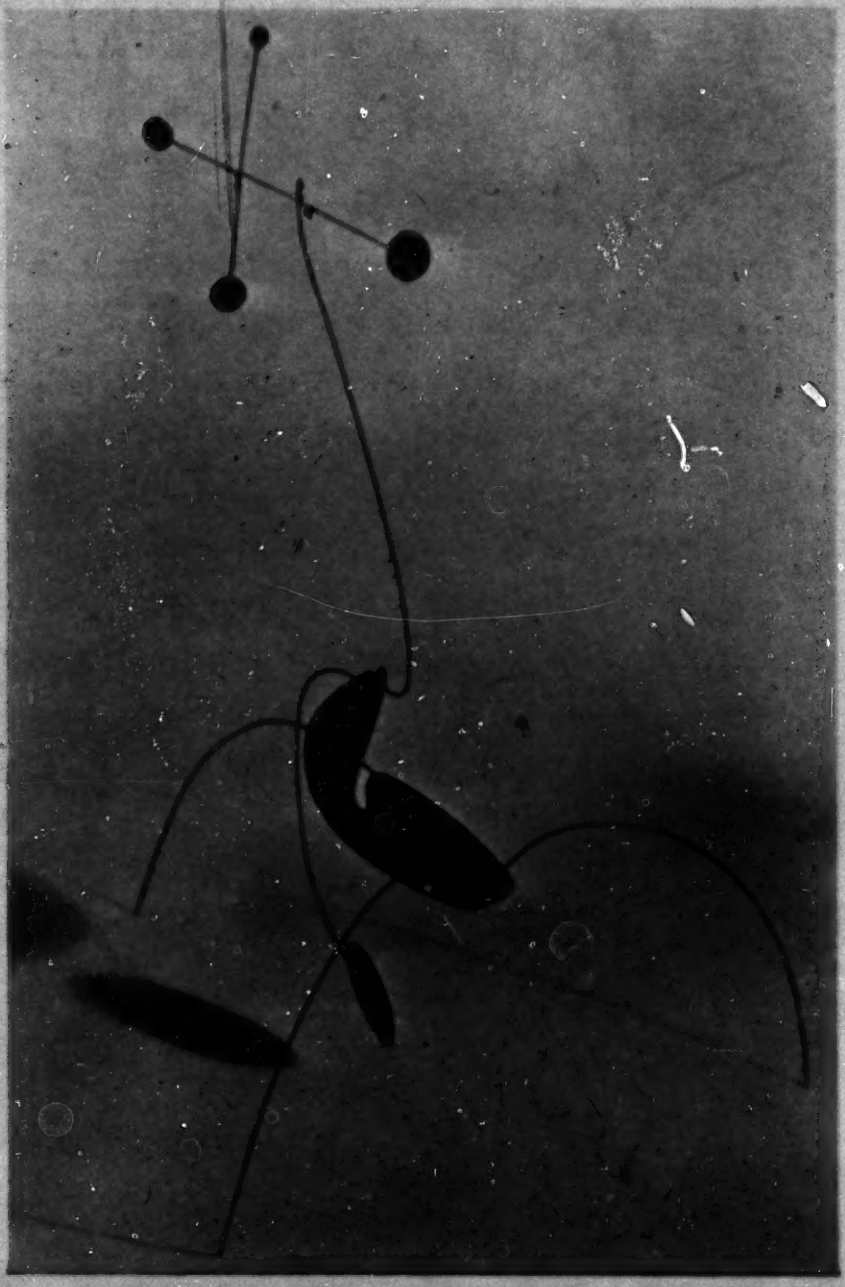
general destiny of movement is sketched for them, and then they are left to work it out for themselves. What they may do at a given moment will be determined by the time of day, the sun, the temperature or the wind. The object is thus always half way between the servility of a statue and the independence of natural events; each of its evolutions is the inspiration of a moment. It may be possible to discern the composer's theme, but the mechanism itself introduces a thousand personal variations. It is a fleeting snatch of swing music, evanescent as the sky or the morning: if you miss it, you have lost it forever. Valéry said of the sea that it is a perpetual recommencement. A "mobile" is in this way like the sea, and is equally enchanting: forever rebeginning, forever new. No use throwing it a passing glance, you must live with it and be fascinated by it. Then and only then will you feel the beauty of its pure and changing forms, at once so free and so disciplined.

It may seem that these movements are made only for the delight of our eyes, but they have a profound metaphysical sense. "Mobiles" have to draw their mobility from some source. At first they were equipped with electric motors, but now it suffices to place them



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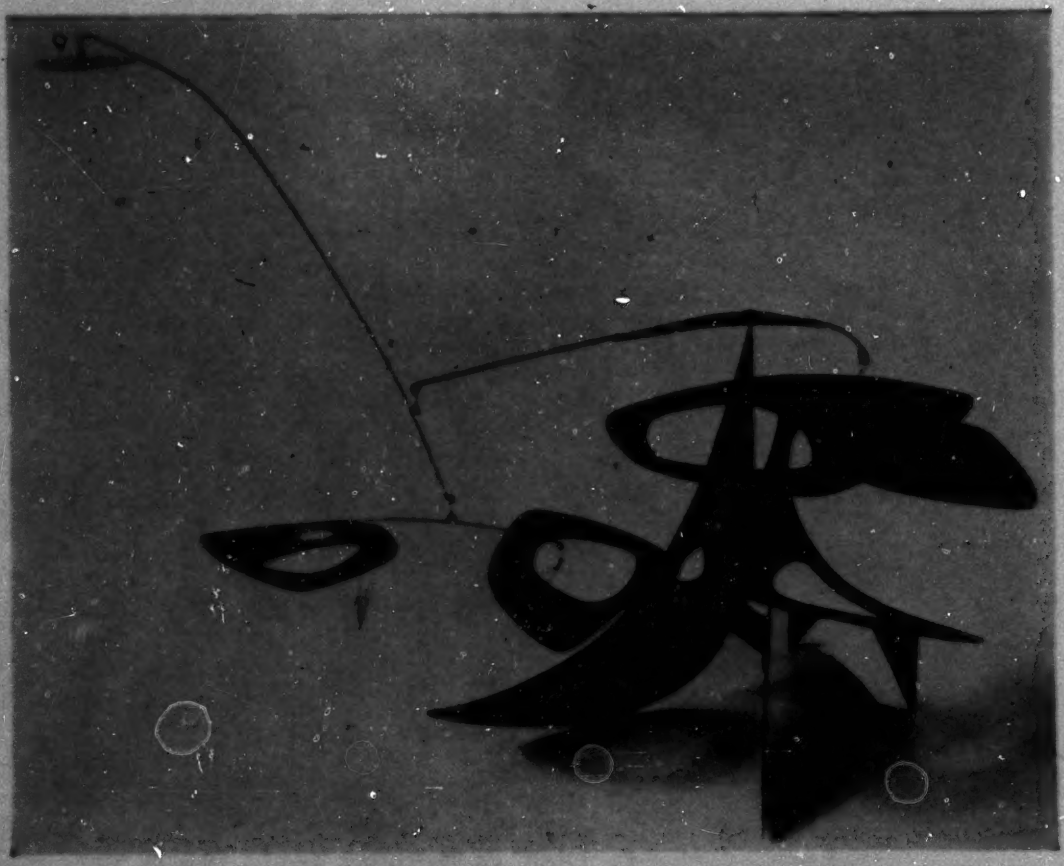

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in the midst of nature, in a garden, for example, or an open window, and let the breezes play with them as with an Æolian harp. They feed on air, they breathe, they borrow life from the vague life of the atmosphere. Thus their mobility is of a particular kind.

Though made with human hands, they never have the precision and efficiency of Vaucanson's automaton. But the charm of the automaton is that it waves a fan or strums a guitar like a man, though with the inflexible jerkiness of a machine. The "mobile", on the other hand, weaves uncertainly, hesitates and at times appears to begin its movement anew, as if it had caught itself in a mistake. Yet the motions are too artfully composed to be compared to those of a marble rolling on a rough board, when each change of direction is determined, by the asperities of the surface.

I was talking with Calder one day in his studio when suddenly a "mobile" beside me, which until then had been quiet, became violently agitated. I stepped quickly back; thinking to be out of its reach. But then, when the agitation had ceased and it appeared to have relapsed into quiescence, its long, majestic tail, which until then had not budged, began mournfully to wave

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and, sweeping through the air, brushed across my face. These hesitations, resumptions, gropings, clumsinesses, the sudden decisions and above all that swan-like grace make of certain "mobiles" very strange creatures indeed, something midway between matter and life. At moments they seem endowed with an intention; a moment later they appear to have forgotten what they intended to do, and finish by merely swaying inanely. My bird, for instance, can fly, swim, float like a swan or a frigate. It is one bird, single and whole. Then of a sudden it goes to pieces and is nothing but a bunch of metal rods shaken by meaningless quiverings.

The "mobiles", which are neither wholly alive nor wholly mechanical, and which always eventually return to their original form, may be likened to water grasses in the changing currents, or to the petals of the sensitive plant, or to gossamer caught in an updraft. In short, although "mobiles" do not seek to imitate anything because they do not "seek" any end whatever, unless it be to create scales and chords of hitherto unknown movements—they are nevertheless at once lyrical inventions, technical combinations of an almost mathematical quality, and sensitive symbols

of Nature, of that profligate Nature which squanders pollen while unloosing a flight of a thousand butterflies; of that inscrutable Nature which refuses to reveal to us whether it is a blind succession of causes and effects, or the timid, hesitant, groping development of an idea.

Calder by Steinberg

CATALOGUE

1946-1947

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No. 23

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25 Root

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EXHIBITIONS 1948

Painting and Sculpture from Europe

*

*John Piper * Lyonel Feininger * Jacques Lipchitz * Graham Sutherland*

*

19th and 20th Century Drawings and Watercolors from the Collection of

John S. Newberry, Jr.

*

Recent Sculpture by Arp, Braque, Brancusi, Calder, Callery

Hepworth, Laurens, Lipchitz, Moore, Picasso

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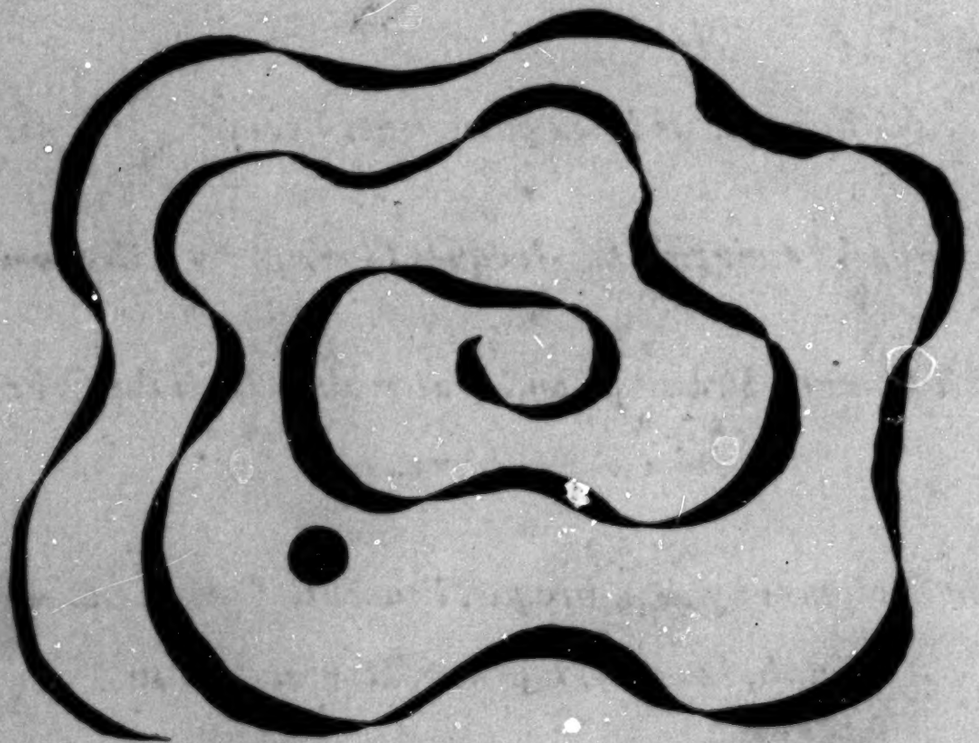

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